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Right-Wing Politics and the Rise of Antisemitism in Europe 1935–1941

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The Radicalization of Hungarian Antisemitism until 1941: On Indigenous Roots and Transnational Embeddedness

This article explores the radicalization of Hungarian antisemitism with a special focus on the years 1938 to 1941 when, by initiating deportations from its re-annexed province of Carpathian Ruthenia, Hungary actively induced the mass murder of Jews and effectively co-launched the Holocaust.¹ It begins with a brief sketch of the historiography of antisemitism in Horthy-era Hungary, which, as I shall argue, has often emphasized international asynchronicities and has recently seen a contest over the question of local continuities. Approaching this literature critically, I shall aim to tackle two major but understudied issues: firstly, that of connecting the process of antisemitic radicalization to the history of Hungarian expansion between 1938 and 1941 and, secondly and more generally, that of further clarifying the complex and controversial relations between Hungarian revisionism, the Nazi alliance, and the radicalization of antisemitism. The paper shall subsequently highlight the potential of transnational and comparative approaches and suggest specific avenues for how such investigations could be applied fruitfully in the future. Last but not least, before concluding, I will reflect on four dichotomies, namely those

1 On the 1941 deportations, see George Eisen and Tamás Stark, “The 1941 Galician Deportation and the Kamenets-Podolsk Massacre: A Prologue to the Hungarian Holocaust,” in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 2 (2013): 207–41. On the region before and during the Second World War, see Raz Segal, *Genocide in the Carpathians. War, Social Breakdown, and Mass Violence, 1914–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). See also Csilla Fedinec, “*A Magyar Szent Koronához visszatért Kárpátalja, 1938–1944*” (Budapest: Jaffa, 2015). On the history of Jews in the region, see Viktória Bányai, Csilla Fedinec, and Szonja Ráhel Komoróczy, eds., *Zsidók Kárpátalján. Történelem és örökség* (Budapest: Aposztróf, 2013).

of imperial-national, core-periphery, inside-outside, and state-society. I thereby intend to address key conceptual questions that arise when scholars attempt to understand the process of antisemitic radicalization in Hungary and beyond.

Asserting Continuities, Relativizing Asynchronicities

An often implicit but nonetheless important disagreement among leading historians of the Horthy era concerns the question of continuity and rupture in the history of Hungarian antisemitism. This question, as I shall aim to show below, is in turn closely connected to that of synchronicities and asynchronicities with other countries and quasi Europe-wide developments on a Nazifying continent.

In recent years, the 1920 *numerus clausus* law and its connection to the anti-Jewish laws of the post-1938 years (which, with hindsight, ended up paving the way for the Holocaust in the country) have been a recurrent focus of scholarly discussions in Hungary. The *numerus clausus* law affected student enrolment in Hungarian higher education and served as a means to reject the majority of Jewish applicants without this chief ambition being openly stated. Indeed, the law's main consequence was concealed by the claim that it aimed to achieve the fair and equal representation of all ethnic groups, including the new legal category of the "non-Jewish Hungarian ethnic majority." In brief, the historiographical controversy revolves around the moot question of whether this law ought to be viewed as the first anti-Jewish law, predating that of 1938, which tends to be colloquially referred to as "the first" such law today. In recent years, Mária M. Kovács has detailed the public narratives surrounding and the semi-secret intentions behind as well as the actual circumstances of the implementation of the law and she has emerged as the most vocal and articulate proponent of the arguments in favor of such a revision of received wisdom.²

At first sight, the stakes of this debate might not appear to be very high, but the ambition to obtain recognition of the antisemitic impetus as well as the severity of the 1920 law is significant for several reasons. As Kovács has shown, in practice, the law entailed the rejection of around two-thirds of the applicants defined as Jewish while the places that were thereby supposedly reserved for "Christian Hungarians" could not all

2 For a nuanced history of the original law, its various revisions, and their implications, see Mária M. Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva. A numerus clausus Magyarországon 1920–1945* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2012).

be filled due to a lack of demand. The debates surrounding the *numerus clausus* law, by implication, address the characteristics of the quarter of a century under Miklós Horthy's rule. Horthy, after all, had become Regent only just before the law was adopted, earlier that year in 1920. The details of the history of this law also shed discomfoting light on the character of the supposedly mild and relatively liberal Bethlenian phase of consolidation during the 1920s. In this respect, it is difficult to decide how to assess the fact that the excessive targets of the law were not entirely fulfilled: does it reveal a degree of good intentions, or rather the simple fact that—falling short of imposing a scandalous ban—not much more could have been achieved at the time in terms of discriminating against “Jewish students?”

In order to explain the importance of this controversy, we also ought to recall that the rehabilitation of the 1920s as a period of conservative consolidation was a key goal of those critical towards the harsh ideological condemnations of the entire Horthy regime, which was *de rigueur* in the early decades of communist rule.³ Among others, this includes, significantly, the young Ignác Romsics (born 1951) who, in more recent decades, has emerged as a leading authority on the period. The original intention, which was to provide a more detached and balanced assessment and thereby help acknowledge what could be valued in a climate of condemnation, may partly—but only partly—account for Romsics's repeated unwillingness to devote sufficient attention to the anti-Jewish discrimination that became state policy with the *numerus clausus* (and took ever more severe forms from the late 1930s onwards). In other words, Romsics's rather marginal and, overall, inadequate treatment of the history of Hungarian antisemitism has rightly come under critical scrutiny in more recent years—even if some of the accusations may have been too polemical.⁴

3 For Romsics's most important articles on the Horthy era, now see Ignác Romsics, *A Horthy-korszak* (Budapest: Helikon, 2017). For his overview of twentieth-century Hungarian history, which devotes limited attention to the persecution and genocide of Hungarian Jews, see Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Osiris, 2010). Translated by Tim Wilkinson.

4 For a good summary of the debate, see Máté Rigó, “A Hungarian version of the Historikerstreit? A summary of the Romsics-Gerő debate among Hungarian historians (2012),” in Imre Kertész Kolleg, Jena, Germany “Cultures of History” forum, accessed June 5, 2018, <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/hungary/a-hungarian-version-of-the-historikerstreit-a-summary-of-the-romsics-gero-debate-among-hungarian-historians-2012/>. I have also addressed the debate in Ferenc Laczó, “New Sensibilities, New Volatilities: Antisemitism in Contemporary Hungary,” *Antisemitism Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 75–108.

With regard to the related larger question of synchronicities, the emphasis both within Hungary and in the—relatively scarce—international scholarship on the country has often been on asynchronicity. The thesis on asynchronicity may be supported by at least three main arguments: that Hungary played, as just discussed, a pioneering role in initiating antisemitic legislation as early as 1920; that in 1942–43 the country constituted the last island of relative safety for well over half a million Jewish people in the broader Nazi German sphere of influence; and, last but certainly not least, that the main phase of the Holocaust in Hungary, in 1944–45, was the last major chapter of the genocide against European Jews. This supposed asynchronicity of the country’s path has recently also been reflected in the impressive project undertaken at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies titled *Jewish Responses to Persecution*. The materials concerning Hungary in 1944–45 were moved from Volume V on the years 1944 to 1946, where they would have chronologically belonged, to Volume IV on 1942–43, where they appear alongside asynchronous developments which the editors nonetheless considered to be more comparable. This constitutes an explicit and, in the context of this Europe-wide project in five volumes, remarkable statement on asynchronicity.⁵

Without meaning to question such notable signs of aynchronicity, the resulting thesis of a country out-of-step with wider trends may be relativized by broader acts of contextualization and by reflecting on continuities. Even if there were not any mass deportations to Nazi camps from Hungary in 1942–43—and neither were there any, for that matter, from Romania, ~~either~~—there are strong reasons to conceive of the years from 1938 to 1944, to borrow from Saul Friedländer, as the Hungarian “years of persecution.”⁶ This was a period of ever more severe and far-reaching antisemitic legislation, socioeconomic exclusion, and repeated instances

5 See Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman, eds., *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume I, 1933–1938* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2010). Alexandra Garbarini with Emil Kerenji, Jan Lambertz, and Avinoam Patt, eds., *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume II, 1938–1940* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2011). Jürgen Matthäus with Emil Kerenji, Jan Lambertz, and Leah Wolfson, eds., *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume III, 1941–1942* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013). Emil Kerenji, ed., *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume IV, 1942–1943* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). Leah Wolfson, ed., *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume V, 1944–1946* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

6 Here I adapt to local circumstances the terminology that was originally applied to Nazi Germany in the years 1933 to 1939: Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

of mass violence.⁷ Focusing on initiatives of the Hungarian state, the years 1941 to 1943 might also be viewed as “the Holocaust before (the main phase of) the Holocaust,” with deportations in the late summer of 1941, mass murder in the Southern provinces in 1942, and the Hungarian army’s active engagement in genocidal crimes on the Eastern Front.⁸ This included, though it was not restricted to, the discriminatory, humiliating and deadly practice of labor service. With over 60,000 Hungarian Jewish casualties, or close to ten percent of all community members subject to violent death prior to 1944, there is no question about this “Holocaust before the main phase of the Holocaust” constituting a major human catastrophe,⁹ irrespective of how much this came to be overshadowed by what followed in 1944–45.¹⁰ 1944 represented a radical rupture in crucial regards but there were also important elements of continuity. Put differently, the asynchronicity of Hungarian developments in the war years is a matter of relativity.

Working towards Nazi Germany, 1938 to 1941

In the years 1938 to 1941, there were also crucial instances of Hungarian synchronicity with contemporary trends on a Nazifying continent. Without being unequivocally committed to the Nazi alliance until the spring

7 For additional details to support this argument, see Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide. An Intellectual History, 1929–1948* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

8 The topic has recently received increased attention and became the subject of controversy. See Tamás Krausz and Éva Mária Varga (eds.), *A magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban—Levéltári dokumentumok 1941–1947* (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2013). Krisztián Ungváry, *Magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban, 1941–1944. Esemény—Elbeszélés—Útőlelet* (Budapest: Osiris, 2015). For a summary and interpretation of the debate, see Péter Csunderlik, “A magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban. Krausz Tamás és Ungváry Krisztián vitája” in *Múltunk*, 2016/1, 234–252. See also the numerous studies by Ákos Fóris dealing with the Hungarian occupying army’s various deeds and crimes.

9 See the chapter “Discrimination, Radicalization and the First Mass Murders” in Zoltán Vági, László Csósz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013). On the so called labor service, see Robert Rozett, *Conscripted Slaves. Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers on the Eastern Front during World War II* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2014) and Randolph L. Braham, *The Hungarian Labor Service System* (Boulder, Col.: East European Monographs, 1977).

10 For the most detailed overview of the Holocaust in Hungary, see Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary* (Boulder, Col.: East European Monographs, 2016). Third, revised edition.

of 1941, the country actively participated in the Nazi-led reorganization of Central and Eastern Europe and was rewarded on four occasions. These consecutive rounds of revisionist successes have been variously labeled “occupations” or “reannexations,” depending on the national point of view. Hungary took territories from three neighboring states—Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania—all pillars of the French-led Versailles system. The first two had been dismantled by acts of aggression of German-led coalitions starting in 1938. Hungary, much-reduced at the end of the First World War, thus managed to nearly double its size by the summer of 1941.

As a consequence, the size of the Jewish community of Hungary not only almost doubled, but this also entailed major changes in its overall composition. Until 1938, the Budapest Jewry accounted for over half of the Jews of Hungary and Pest’s Neolog community was the country’s most significant Jewish organization. Yet with the aforementioned territorial aggrandizements, the Jews of Hungary became a much more diverse group in terms of recent experiences as well as orientation, with the balance shifting to the *vidék* and the Orthodox communities. Overnight, close to every second Jew of Hungary belonged to one of Carpathian Ruthenia’s traditionalist communities.

The four rounds of expansion did not amount to the reestablishment of Greater Hungary as it existed until the end of the First World War but delivered more than Hungarian ethnicists could reasonably expect. The fact that upon the Hungarian re-annexation of Northern Transylvania in 1940, suddenly more than twice as many Romanians resided in Hungary than Hungarians in Romania, illustrates this point. Comparable biases favoring Hungarian territorial claims were observable in the dismantling of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia too.¹¹ At the same time, the Nazi-led process of border revisions in these years, prior to the attack on the Soviet Union, resulted in the East Central European region coming somewhat closer to having ethnic borders than the Versailles system of treaties. The latter, after all, had combined the Wilsonian idea of national self-determination with the endorsement of new, composite majorities with strategic considerations as well as the occasional one-sided historical argument. However, making states more ethnically homogeneous via border revision only heightened ambitions of national purification.

11 On the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920, see Ignác Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary. The Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920* (Boulder, Co.: East European Monographs, 2002). On Hungarian revisionism, see Miklós Zeidler, *Ideas of Territorial Revision in Hungary, 1920–1945* (Boulder, Co.: East European Monographs, 2007).

In the years 1938 to 1941, not only Hungary's shape and size but the regional and the continental constellations were drastically transformed too. By the fall of 1938 many believed that a new European age beyond the post-World War I settlement was dawning (even as Nazi Germany, deceptively enough for many at the time, still formulated some of its chief claims on Czechoslovakia in the language of national self-determination). A mere two years later, however, after the shock defeat of France, but before the attack on the Soviet Union, many agreed—affirmatively or critically—that a Nazi German-dominated continent had come about. It might be less generally known how much the regional environment of Hungary was altered. With the annexation of Austria in March 1938, Nazi Germany became a neighboring country. By the summer of 1941 Nazi Germany was present not only westwards but also southwards (in what used to be the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, jointly occupied by four powers in 1941), and to the northeast of the country (in what used to be Soviet Ukraine). In addition, all of Hungary's remaining neighbors, namely Romania as well as the newly established Slovak (1939) and Croatian (1941) states, were allied to Germany too.¹²

Domestically, these years saw the increased popularity of the Hungarian leadership go hand in hand with political radicalization. By 1940, having fulfilled the chief propaganda promise and greatest political-emotional goal of his regime, that of territorial ~~aggrandizement beyond~~ reasonable expectations, Regent Horthy enjoyed unprecedented levels of popularity. Accordingly, his cult was also enriched with new contents—"country enlarger" becoming his new epitaph.¹³ However, the years of Hungarian aggrandizement coincided with and, to an extent, fueled right-wing radicalization within the ruling party as well as the secession of far-right groupings from it. Furthermore, this period also saw the meteoric rise of the openly fascistic Arrow Cross Party, which made spectacular gains in the elections of 1939.¹⁴ Contrary to what the regime claimed in its contemporary propaganda (and numerous later journalistic and historical works), the Arrow Cross was not the beneficiary of significant direct support from Nazi Germany at this time, nor were there direct threats sent or credible

12 See, among others, Jean Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011). Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013). Tatjana Tönsmeier, *Das Dritte Reich und die Slowakei 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2005).

13 See Dávid Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz, 1919–1944* (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2016).

14 See Rudolf Paksa, *Magyar nemzetiszocialisták* (Budapest: Osiris, 2013).

forms of pressure exerted on the Hungarian political establishment to further radicalize its antisemitic policies. However, the new political constellation led to mimetic competition within the country between two major far-right and explicitly antisemitic forces, as well as between their various fractions and organizational levels. At the same time, there was increasing mimetic competition between Hungary and several of its neighbors, especially Romania but also Slovakia. This was encouraged by Nazi Germany's dominant role in the region and on the continent and the powerful local expectation that the Nazis would act as chief arbiters in the future.

In this broader political and international context, but primarily due to internal self-mobilization, the years between 1938 and 1941 saw a gradual but steady escalation of Hungarian antisemitism. The radicalization of antisemitism took various forms, from legal to bureaucratic, through to the downright illegal.¹⁵ In terms of the legal process, three major laws and their accompanying host of decrees, deserve to be mentioned: these are those of 1938, 1939, and 1941.¹⁶ Law XV. of 1938, officially called "To more effectively assure the balance of societal and economic life," and colloquially known as "the first anti-Jewish law," limited the percentage of those it defined as Jews to twenty in the liberal professions and in trade, financial, and industrial companies with more than ten white-collar employees.¹⁷ Allowing for a number of exceptions, the law defined as Jews also all those who converted after August 1, 1919 (the end of the Hungarian Republic of Councils), thereby adding a politically-charged, racial element to its primarily religious definition.

The law of 1938 was meant to be enforced within five years. However, it was quickly followed by Law IV. of 1939, officially called "Limiting the Jews' Conquest of Space in Public Life and the Economy" (colloquially known as "the second anti-Jewish law"). The law added significant restrictions to the one from the year before: in the liberal professions, the proportion of "Jews" could no longer exceed six percent and such people were to be banned from the state administration, the apparatuses of jus-

15 This aspect is appropriately highlighted and repeatedly illustrated in Zoltán Vági, László Csósz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013).

16 For the documentation of anti-Jewish laws and decrees, see Róbert Vértess, ed., *Magyarországi zsidótörvények és rendeletek 1938–1945* (Budapest: Polgár, 1997).

17 On the development of anti-Jewish policies of the times, see Nathaniel Katzburg, *Hungary and the Jews: Policy and Legislation, 1920–1943* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1981). On the histories of the medical, legal, and engineering professions and their organizations during the Horthy era, see Mária M. Kovács, *Liberal Professions and Illiberal Politics: Hungary from the Habsburgs to the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994).

tice, and secondary schools. Several further restrictions were introduced regarding Jewish employment at companies and at the same time—following its nominal withdrawal due to international pressure in the late 1920s without a consistent change of practice—the *numerus clausus* on university enrolment was formally reintroduced too. Moreover, the 1939 law was largely based on a racial notion, even though it continued to refer to denominational groupings as well. While allowing for a number of exceptions, the law stated that people with at least two Jewish grandparents were to be legally discriminated. The enforced changes brought widespread misery to the middle and lower middle classes forcibly labeled Jewish: the law resulted in some 90,000 people losing their formal employment (with only some of them managing, as a result of informal arrangements, to continue ~~working~~ in their former line of work). The consequences resembled in many ways those of the legal changes unfolding in Germany after January 1933.

Strikingly, it took only another two years for Hungary to adopt a law that resembled the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 rather closely: Law XV. of 1941 was officially titled “Supplement to and modification of the marriage law (Law XXI. of 1894) as well as related and necessary measures of racial protection” (it has come to be known as “the law on race protection” or, even more simply, “the third anti-Jewish law”). Banning mixed marriages and punishing sexual contact between “non-Jews” and “Jews,” the law was closely modeled on the first two articles of the infamous German laws from 1935 and employed similar racial terminology. ~~However, unlike the much more widely known German law, the Hungarian one had a gendered dimension: Christian men could continue their affairs with their “Jewish” mistresses but not the other way round. With some exceptions, the latter law considered anyone Jewish whose grandparents had at some point been Jewish by religion.~~

Such a law was adopted during the summer of Hungary’s joining the war on the Eastern Front and can be considered an important step in aligning the country’s official ideology with that of Nazi Germany. There was only one significant change in terms of the law’s political endorsement as compared to those passed in 1938 and 1939. As this law’s racial definitions explicitly challenged the Christian meaning of the act of Baptism and thereby the right of the Christian churches to determine who was a Christian, the chief representatives of these churches in the Upper House opposed its adoption.¹⁸

18 Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary. Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

While these three major laws were clearly the result of domestically driven antisemitic mobilization and the radicalization of Hungarian decision-makers and representatives, it is still worth noting how their adoption closely coincided with the consolidation of the country's alliance with Nazi Germany: the first major anti-Jewish law was adopted on May 29, 1938, within three months of the Nazi German annexation of Austria resulting in the two countries becoming neighbors; the second was adopted on May 5, 1939, within two months of the Hungarian attack, coinciding with the Nazi German attack on the rump Czech lands, and the incorporation of Carpathian Ruthenia and parts of Eastern Slovakia (formerly the easternmost part of the now fully destroyed Czechoslovak state); the third, on August 8, 1941, was issued within two months of the joint attack on the Soviet Union. The aim of securing a favorable position in the emerging Nazi-dominated Europe and the rise of anti-semitism domestically thus appear to have been two closely connected agendas: the Hungarian approach can therefore aptly be described, inspired by Ian Kershaw's famous expression, as "working towards Nazi Germany."¹⁹

Further supporting evidence for this suggestion is provided by the fact that, over the course of these years, the legitimating narrative underpinning Hungarian antisemitic legislation was momentarily transformed too.²⁰ The discourse surrounding the 1938 law still revolved around the notion of "societal balance." Drawing on widely rehearsed ideas regarding the special modernizing potential and the subsequent "overrepresentation" of Jews, infamously formulated by István Széchenyi in the Hungarian Parliament during the debates on Jewish emancipation as early as 1844, and incorporated into the *numerus clausus* law of 1920,²¹ the notion of balance was used to make legal discrimination appear as a form of social compensation and ethnicized justice. By 1941, Hungary introduced Nuremberg-style racial laws, which in fact employed a somewhat more restrictive definition than their putative German model concerning who qualified as Jewish (even as the country relativized its legal racism

19 Ian Kershaw, "'Working Towards the Führer.' Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," in *Contemporary European History* 2 (1993): 103–118.

20 For a detailed overview of Hungarian debates around the 'Jewish question,' see János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001).

21 Relevant passages of this infamous speech are reproduced as "Gr. Széchenyi István: 'Ezen szerencsétlen népfaj ...' (Felszólalás a főrendi házban) 1844. október 13," in Géza Komoróczy, *"Nekem itt zsidónak kell lenni." Források és dokumentumok (1965–2012)* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2013), 590–3.

by adding gender discrimination to the mix).²² Notwithstanding such conspicuous gender bias, the superimposition of racial categories by the state on what were three major religious communities of Hungarian Jews (the Orthodox, the Congress or Neolog, and the status quo ante)²³ but also on a hundred thousand others was thereby essentially complete. The explicit racialization of antisemitic argumentation taking place between 1938 and 1941 amounted to a process of internal Nazification, of which the intellectual sources were only partially local.

As previously shown by Zoltán Vági, László Csősz, and Gábor Kádár, the process of antisemitic radicalization in Hungary can be regarded as a state-led and largely state-controlled process.²⁴ Aside from its legalized forms, it was also enforced through bureaucratic channels, i.e. bureaucrats taking the initiative to go beyond the letter of the legal stipulations in the implementation of discriminatory measures. Sometimes, this even took on illegal forms, such as through the violation of existing legal norms at a time when the practitioners of such acts did not need to fear any negative consequences. An increasing number of such examples have been uncovered and published in recent years. Krisztián Ungváry's much-discussed monograph *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege* (The Balance Sheet of the Horthy System), for example, paints a rich picture of the radicalism from below at the time of the country's antisemitic turn in 1938–39.²⁵ Yet in what exact ways and to what degree such lower-level initiatives resembled or even drew directly on international and, more specifically, German models remains to be explored. Moreover, as Ungváry, similarly to Kádár and Vági, has tended to highlight economic incentives, it would be worth devoting more attention to motivations that went beyond the ambition of acquiring "Jewish wealth." Indeed, as Dániel Bolgár has recently shown, all three authors reproduced contemporaneous statistics in a rather uncritical manner and thereby have

22 For a Europe-wide comparison of such legislation, see Chapter 12 "Legislation against Jews in Europe: A Comparison," in Christian Gerlach, *The Extermination of the European Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 315–335.

23 For a thorough history of the various branches of Judaism in Hungary, see Kinga Frojimovics, *Szétszakadt történelem. Zsidó vallási irányzatok Magyarországon 1868–1950* (Budapest: Balassi, 2008).

24 See Zoltán Vági, László Csősz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013).

25 Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege. Diszkrimináció, szociálpolitika és antiszemitizmus Magyarországon* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2013). The book has appeared in a revised form and under a different title since: Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer és antiszemitizmusának mérlege. Diszkrimináció és társadalompolitika Magyarországon, 1919–1944* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2017).

tended to overestimate the proportion of “Jewish wealth” within “the national economy.”²⁶

The Potential of Transnational and Comparative Investigations

There is a discrepancy between historical scholarship and the country’s politics of history concerning the origins and implementation of the Holocaust in Hungary. After 1989, it may have looked like this gap would gradually close, as the Hungarian share of responsibility came to be not only better researched but also more openly acknowledged by state representatives. However, in recent years there has been a revival of externalization attempts in the semi-official politics of history. In other words, there has been a renewed focus on German responsibility with the aim of underplaying Hungarian co-responsibility.²⁷

This politically-charged, nationalistic reinterpretation—that in many ways represent a return to what I have labeled elsewhere “the ethnicist anti-fascism” of earlier decades²⁸—goes against the main thrust of newer scholarship that meticulously embeds the Holocaust of the Hungarian Jewry within Hungarian history and wider social developments.²⁹ Referring primarily to the works co-authored by Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, those of Krisztián Ungváry and, to a lesser extent, also that of Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly titled *Das letzte Kapitel* (The Last Chapter), the most significant statement on the subject by German scholars to date,³⁰ András Kovács has recently labelled this early 21st century

26 See Dániel Bolgár, “Mítoszok a zsidó jólétről—a Horthy-kori statisztikáktól a mai magyar történetírásig,” *Múltunk*, 4 (2015): 112–163. See Krisztián Ungváry, “‘Semmi okunk sincs azt hinni hogy a zsidók jók, jobbak voltak a kapitalizmusban’—Válasz Bolgár Dánielnek” *Múltunk*, 4 (2015): 164–188. The publication of these detailed arguments was preceded by an exchange between Dániel Bolgár and Krisztián Ungváry in the weekly *Magyar Narancs*.

27 See Éva Kovács, “The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014. Some Remarks,” *S:I.M.O.N.* 1 (2017): 109–120. On the origins of these attempts, see Regina Fritz, *Nach Krieg und Judenmord. Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

28 For details of this, see Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide. An Intellectual History, 1929–1948* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

29 See the contributions to the thematic issue “The Holocaust in Hungary in Contexts. New Perspectives and Research Results,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 3 (2015): 539–772.

30 See Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel: Realpolitik, Ideologie und der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944/45* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt,

scholarly trend as “Hungarian intentionalism.”³¹ This is a trend whose representatives, by and large convincingly, favor functionalist arguments when explaining the behavior of Nazi Germany in relation to Hungary and its large Jewish community in 1944, while highlighting the crucial role of conscious Hungarian preferences and decisions in initiating the Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust. The gap between the political and the scholarly sphere that seemed to be closing after 1989 has thus been widening again.

Whereas the aforementioned historiographic works depict the country’s antisemitic radicalization as an essentially internally-driven process and thereby offer a laudable critique of untenable apologetic positions, they tend to be based on an all too strict separation of internal and foreign policy considerations and, more generally, reveal the relative insularity of national scholarly concerns. Such a context of polarization where nationalist apologies are answered by scholarly articulations of national responsibility might partially explain, but cannot fully justify, why the transnational and comparative dimensions of Hungarian antisemitic discourses and practices of the late 1930s and early 1940s have only rarely been researched. It is the task of this section to highlight the potential of such approaches and suggest some specific avenues for future research.

The comparative investigations that do exist tend to be primarily intra-regional, typically restricting their horizons to the states allied to Nazi Germany within East Central Europe. In other words, they do not discuss Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, or countries further west such as France, Belgium, or the Netherlands and often focus primarily on the connections between these countries’ foreign policy choices and their anti-Jewish policies.³² The perspective on the primacy of *realpolitical* pursuits of state and national interests, over more ideological considerations, even during the Second World War, has been developed, perhaps most

2002). Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, *Hullarablás. A magyar zsidók gazdasági megsemmisítése* (Hannah Arendt Egyesület–Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest, 2005). Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, *A végső döntés. Berlin, Budapest, Birkenau 1944* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2013). Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege. Diszkrimináció, szociálpolitika és antiszemitizmus Magyarországon* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2013).

31 See András Kovács, “Hungarian Intentionalism: New Directions in the Historiography of the Hungarian Holocaust” in, eds. Randolph L. Braham and András Kovács, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016), 3–24.

32 For a comparative classic, see Asher Cohen, “Pétain, Horthy, Antonescu and the Jews, 1942–1944: Toward a Comparative View,” *Yad Vashem Studies* (1987): 163–198. For a broader view, see István Deák, *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015).

persuasively, by Holly Case in her book on the Transylvanian Question, *Between States*.³³ Case's perspective on Romania and Hungary, beyond revealing remarkable similarities between the two countries, also explores and demonstrates the importance of their interactions.

While this much-praised monograph undoubtedly offers many fresh insights and shifts the discussion in a much-needed transnational direction, it cannot quite account for the process of antisemitic radicalization in Hungary in the later stages of the war. Firstly, by this time, the genocidal agenda acquired primacy over the pursuit of broad international recognition that would have been the key to fulfilling the country's territorial ambitions. Secondly, in the Hungary of 1944–45 the role of ideological legitimization, including the special function of the Judeo-bolshevik myth, in a context where the Red Army had practically reached the country's borders, has to be taken very seriously indeed. Put differently, the comparative method could still prove its usefulness if it was deployed more systematically to account for the significant differences in the timing and phases, methods, territorial scope, and types of victim groups of the Holocaust in Romania and Hungary in particular.

At the same time, transnational interactions and mimetic competitions should be explored further with a view to understand their varied consequences. Intriguingly, Slovak-Hungarian entanglements in 1938–39 contributed to radicalizing the anti-Jewish policies of both countries. Here, similarly to the much more widely known Polish-German conflict over the citizenship of Jews on the eve of the November pogroms in Germany, the unresolved citizenship issue between the two countries also acted as a major catalyst.³⁴ In turn, and this is one of the major conclusions of Case's Hungarian-Romanian case studies, mimetic competition could have a moderating impact too.³⁵ The agenda of ethnic homogenization, present on both the Hungarian and the Romanian sides, was combined with comparable claims to future enlargement (which depended on credible claims to possessing integrative force) as well as a balance of forces between them (which made direct retaliation following the violation of

33 Holly Case, *Between States. The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). See also Béni L. Balogh, *Küzdelem Erdélyért. A magyar-román viszony és a kisebbségi kérdés 1940–1944 között* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 2013).

34 See Leslie L. Waters, "Adjudicating Loyalty: Identity Politics and Civil Administration in the Hungarian-Slovak Borderlands, 1938–1940," *Contemporary European History* 3 (2015): 351–374. See also Attila Simon, *Magyar idők a Felvidéken, 1938–1945* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2014).

35 Case, *Between States*.

minority rights plausible and even likely). Both of the latter clearly made the pursuit of ethnic exclusivity less advisable.

Evidently, the above remarks are not meant to question the strong connection between international relations and domestic policies towards minorities—even if, as argued, this connection could at times be far from decisive. The major differences in the treatment within Hungary of ethnic Germans, Romanians, and Slovaks, on the one hand, whose “co-ethnics” controlled neighboring states of their own, and Ruthenians, Jews, and Roma, on the other, who lacked such outside protectors, clearly attest to the relevance of such a connection. Rather, I am suggesting a more complex treatment of several interrelated but distinct factors such as territorial revisionism, the Nazi alliance, independentism, ethnic radicalization, and antisemitism.

In the case of Hungary, Krisztián Ungváry has usefully highlighted how widespread ethnic radicalism was among the anti-Nazi and pro-independentist Hungarians and he is also right to underline that the agenda of ethnic homogenization crossed the epochal border of 1945.³⁶ It is similarly conspicuous how the Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi could connect plans of further territorial expansion with the Nazi alliance (in his vision, Hungarians would play an imperial role alongside, and hopefully almost comparable to, Germans and Italians) while de-coupling his idiosyncratic radical antisemitism from a broader agenda of ethnic radicalism (i.e. Szálasi has propagated a hierarchically-organized multiethnic state).³⁷ Such examples are highly suggestive; a broader study and a proper historicization of the evolving relations between territorial expansionism, independentism, the Nazi alliance, ethnic radicalization, and antisemitism in various European countries remain significant historiographic deficits.

Let us move on to the untapped potential of comparisons where transnational, or rather proto-transnational, approaches have been more common. There has been a surprisingly high level of mutual neglect between the bodies of scholarship on Germany and Hungary in recent years,

36 See Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer és antiszemitizmusának mérlege. Diszkrimináció és társadalompolitika Magyarországon, 1919–1944* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2017).

37 On Szálasi, see László Karsai, *Szálasi Ferenc. Politikai életrajz* (Budapest: Balassi, 2016) and Rudolf Paksa, *Szálasi Ferenc és a hungarizmus* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2013). On the Arrow Cross’ involvement in the Holocaust in English, see “The Arrow Cross Regime” of Zoltán Vági, László Csósz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013). See also László Karsai, “Zsidósors Budapesten a nyilas uralom idején” in *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen 4. 1944. október 15.–1945. január 18.*, eds. Elek Karsai and László Karsai (Budapest: Balassi, 2014). On the history of Hungarian national socialism, more generally, see Rudolf Paksa, *Magyar nemzetiszocialisták* (Budapest: Osiris, 2013).

when it comes to the study of common topics such as right-wing radicalism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust. But the investigations that have highlighted the importance of Hungarian connections to Nazi Germany have tended to conceive such matters as questions of Nazi German influence and impact, often underestimating the Hungarian scope of action, including the possibilities of partial adoption and hybridization. That the latter ought not be underestimated, not even in the context of mass violence, is illustrated by the morally rather dubious example sketched by Vági, Csősz, and Kádár: as they point out, the 1942 massacres in the Southern province of Hungary (today's northern Serbia) were also a way to fight the anti-partisan warfare on the home front and, by pointing to the serious danger partisans supposedly posed, aimed to **reduce** further Hungarian engagement on the Eastern Front.³⁸ I cite this example because it captures the perplexing connection between Hungarian mass crimes, some of whose key perpetrators were major supporters of the Axis cause, on the one hand, and an attempt made by their superiors at the very same time to disengage from the joint war effort, on the other. The example thereby **brilliantly illustrates** the multidimensionality of transnational agency.

Nazi Germany clearly constituted the key transnational connection during the radicalization of Hungary on various levels, from foreign and military policy through to economic and social policy and the cultural and intellectual lives of the two countries.³⁹ However, having overcome unhelpful political taboos, it could also serve as a basis for comparison. Here the following two cases could provide valuable materials for more detailed comparisons: first, as mentioned above, the racial laws of Nazi Germany of 1935 and those of Hungary in 1941 ought to be seen as closely comparable. Aside from the gender dimension, the definition of categories was similar. The implementation of the law was thus notably different: as Gábor Szegedi has shown, gender discrimination was a major aspect of the milder implementation of the respective Hungarian law.⁴⁰

38 See Vági, Csősz and Kádár, *Evolution of a Genocide*. On ways of dealing with the mass crimes committed in Novi Sad, see Árpád von Klimó, *Remembering Cold Days. The 1942 Massacre of Novi Sad, Hungarian Politics and Society, 1942–1989* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).

39 For an earlier proposal in a comparable vein, see Kiran Klaus Patel, "In Search for a Transnational Historicization. National Socialism and its Place in History," in *Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*, eds. Konrad H. Jarausch and Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 96–116.

40 Gábor Szegedi, "Stand by Your Man. Honor and Race Defilement in Hungary, 1941–44," *Hungarian Historical Review* 3 (2015): 577–605.

How should we account for this curious difference between the two countries? Considering the significance of social historical, cultural, and political factors this may be a good leading question for a comparative investigation.

The Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938 and the Hungarian occupations/re-annexations of Southern Slovakia in 1938 and Northern Transylvania in 1940 provide similarly intriguing bases for comparison. As briefly evoked above, the “re-annexed territories” are of special importance in the history of Hungarian radicalization: upon the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in the Subcarpathian governorship masses of Jewish residents were denied citizenship and their expulsion organized. From the vantage point of this peripheral region, the road to the Holocaust in Hungary appears like a much more continuous story of radicalization between 1938 and 1941. The Subcarpathian periphery is in fact ~~also~~ geographically central to the unfolding of the genocide in the sense that, when the uniquely large-scale deportations of 1941 from there were followed by the wider deportations in the spring of 1944, they started from here too.

It is clear that the implementation of antisemitic measures could proceed much faster and in a more brutal manner in these places than in the core areas of the two countries, but faster and more brutal did not necessarily imply a more systematic approach by agents of the Hungarian state. Accusations of “Jewish treason” under foreign occupation could at times be outweighed by the acknowledgment of specific Hungarian Jewish roles in and contributions to the lives of Hungarian communities during the interwar years.⁴¹ To what extent occupation policies facilitated a radicalization of antisemitism in these places and what exceptions were made in the interest of a smoother incorporation of various lands would require more research. Here an additional issue that might make comparisons between the expanding and radicalizing German and Hungarian states all the more intriguing is that the Hungarian re-annexations took place before the adoption of racial laws and, more generally, during a slightly earlier phase of radicalization. It remains to be clarified what difference this actually made in terms of the implementation of antisemitic occupation policies and the added radicalism such policies generated.

41 See, for instance, Attila Gidó, *Két évtized. A kolozsvári zsidóság a két világháború között* (Cluj: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2016).

Conceptual Issues

In this closing section, I want to briefly reflect on the use of four key conceptual dichotomies in the study of Hungarian antisemitism which are as follows: the imperial versus the national, the core versus the periphery, the inside versus the outside (of the putative Hungarian space), and the state versus society. As in the case of modern Germany between 1871 and 1945, a clean distinction between empire and nation-state is not possible in the case of Hungary: the state which Hungarian political elites aimed to convert to a relatively homogeneous nation-state upon the Compromise of 1867 has also been called the Empire of Saint Stephen. What Hungarian political actors in the late 1930s and early 1940s basically conceived of as a project of national reintegration and nation-state building has typically been derided as Hungarian imperialism by those who opposed it. This illustrates a wider regional pattern according to which, by the twentieth century, somebody's nationalist could be somebody else's imperialist and the other way around.

Regarding the historiography of Hungarian antisemitic radicalization, it is obvious that in recent decades the phenomenon has almost exclusively been connected to ethnic nationalism and hardly ever to imperialism. Raz Segal's recent attempt, in *Genocide in the Carpathians*, to embed the stories of Hungarian expansion and genocidal policies in the much broader history of colonialism and imperialism is intriguing and deserves to be discussed further, but it clearly goes against the current mainstream.⁴² The suggestion made above to focus on the connections between the histories of Hungarian expansion and exclusion and those of antisemitic radicalization and the Holocaust should also help us test the—far from self-evident—meaning and usefulness of the analytical categories of nation and empire.

Whereas the distinction between core and peripheral—typically newly acquired or re-acquired—areas has been justly crucial to attempts to understand the phenomenon of antisemitic radicalization in South-East European countries such as Romania or Bulgaria, a more precise history focused on Hungary should distinguish between the core area of the capital city, the semi-periphery of the rest of the country within the Trianon borders, and the re-acquired multiethnic peripheries. Whereas between 1938 and 1941, the key distinction was between the first two and the third, by 1944, the main dividing line became that between the first

⁴² See Raz Segal, *Genocide in the Carpathians. War, Social Breakdown, and Mass Violence, 1914–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

and the latter two: unlike Romania and Bulgaria, the systematic genocide against the Jews of Hungary encompassed the semi-periphery of the core areas too.

It is similarly intriguing to observe how most of the worst excesses of violence against Jews took place outside the country's territory—whether after their deportation, during labor service assignments often beyond the borders, or against local Jewish inhabitants upon the invasion of the Soviet Union. Whereas the numerical majority of the victims during the Second World War from Hungary were Jewish (with Jewish self-definitions being, of course, essentially different from the persecutors' definition of Jewishness), the majority of those killed by Hungarian state agents ~~immediately before and shortly after the country's entry into the war within Hungarian-controlled territory~~, in 1940 and 1942, were not. Then, Romanians and Serbs respectively were the primary victims of such acts of mass violence. As argued just above, the genocidal violence against Jews reached the semi-periphery of the country by the spring of 1944. It reached the core area of the capital in the autumn of the same year. It was in the latter period when highly visible murderous violence was inflicted on a massive scale within the country, claiming, for the first time, tens of thousands of Jewish victims.

The distinction between the inside and the outside thus remains very useful when studying the Hungarian process of radicalization. Making this distinction can also help us remember that most Hungarian Jewish survivors experienced most of the worst forms of violence outside the territory of postwar Hungary. This in turn may have made their subsequent relationship to the Land of Hagar somewhat less tormented and their societal reintegration, in psychological terms, slightly—but at most slightly—less burdensome.

The state-society dichotomy has recently been complemented in Holocaust Studies by the dichotomy between the presence and absence of statehood: in his ~~latest~~ monograph, *Black Earth*, Timothy Snyder argues that the Holocaust could only be imagined and implemented due to the—Soviet and Nazi—double destruction of East European state structures and that the presence or absence of statehood was the crucial determinant for survival.⁴³ However, the antisemitic radicalization of Hungary was clearly a state-led process and so was the implementation of the genocide in 1944 with the large majority of victims being forcibly transported from Hungary to be murdered on German *Reich* territory.

43 See Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth. The Holocaust as History and Warning* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015).

Besides, it was the change in ~~the leadership personnel of the Hungarian state~~ that made a decisive difference in 1944.

Moreover, as Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági have highlighted, in modern Hungary Jews were repeatedly subject to pogrom-like violence. But in 1944 the ghettoization and deportation of around 437,000 Hungarian “former citizens”—citizens who by then had practically been deprived of all their rights by their own state—was conducted without major instances of such societal acts of physical violence.⁴⁴ As argued above, the antisemitic radicalization of the late 1930s and early 1940s was pursued by both state agents and societal actors but the state remained at the center of the entire process, continuously channeling and sanctioning it. Though reflecting on the relationship between the state and society is useful and relevant, in the case of Hungary it actually provides counter-evidence to Snyder’s argument.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have examined the radicalization of Hungarian antisemitism with a special focus on the years 1938 to 1941. Following a brief sketch of recent interpretations and controversies concerning antisemitism in Horthy-era Hungary, I have highlighted continuities in the country’s antisemitic radicalization and relativized the thesis on Hungarian asynchronicity with international developments on a Nazifying continent. In the second part, I have focused on the gradual but steady escalation of Hungarian antisemitism between 1938 and 1941, and have explored the dialectic between expansion and exclusion. Emphasizing the internal, primarily legal dynamics of radicalization, while pointing to crucial changes in the broader regional and continental environments in which Hungary found itself, this part has conceptualized antisemitic self-mobilization as a Hungarian way of “working towards Nazi Germany.”

In terms of avenues for future comparative and transnational investigations I have pointed to the varied consequences of mimetic competition between Hungary and two of its rival neighbors. I have also suggested two concrete ways, one related to the respective laws on race protection and

44 Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, “Hosszú évszázad: antiszemita erőszak Magyarországon, 1848–1956” in *A holokauszt Magyarországon hetven év múltán: Történelem és emlékezet*, eds. Randolph L. Braham and András Kovács (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2015), 76–110.

the other to the histories of incorporation, in which direct comparisons between the radicalization of Nazi Germany and Horthy-era Hungary (tabooed for primarily political reasons for too long) could be made fruitful. Last but not least, I have evaluated the usefulness of four conceptual dichotomies and have reached the following conclusions: Firstly, that the state-society dichotomy remains useful to show that the process of antisemitic radicalization in Hungary was clearly state-led. Secondly, that there were notable differences between the inside and the outside of the putative Hungarian space when it came to the violence against various groups and that outside spaces were “privileged” in terms of anti-Jewish violence until the late stages of the war. Thirdly, that a simple dichotomy between core and periphery ought to be replaced by a tripartite division to understand a crucial dynamic that distinguished Hungary from Romania or Bulgaria. Last but not least, that the meaning of the distinction between imperial and national ~~remains rather unclear~~ and the usefulness of this particular dichotomy ~~deserves to be explored further.~~

